

The Greek Communist Party (KKE) and the Greek–Italian War, 1940–1: an Analysis of Zahariadis’ Three Letters

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An analysis of the position of the Greek Communist Party (KKE)¹ during the Greek–Italian war is interesting not only because it involves a hitherto unsolved puzzle – how and why the KKE’s General Secretary, Nikos Zahariadis, wrote his ‘three letters’ – but also because, it involves background factors that help explain how the KKE emerged, during the occupation period, in possession of an invaluable useful ‘patriotic’ image. Such an image, obtained from Zahariadis’ ‘first’ letter, undeniably facilitated the party’s successful efforts to build up

1. The KKE (*Kommounistiko Komma tis Elladas*) was created in November 1918 under the initials SEKE (Socialist Working Party of Greece). In April 1920, SEKE, after its ‘left’ faction had predominated over the ‘right’ faction, joined the Communist International under the name SEKE (K) (K, for ‘Communist’) and in 1924 it took the name KKE. During the years 1920–30 the party, torn apart by internal divisions, appeared unable to expand; the greatest membership it reached was about 2,500. During the party’s worst crisis – the so-called ‘factionalist struggle without principles’, in 1930 – the membership dropped to 1,500. One year later, the Comintern intervened in the KKE’s internal affairs, imposing as a new leader the Moscow-trained Zahariadis, then twenty-nine years old. Zahariadis quickly succeeded in unifying and reorganizing the party, whose membership rose steadily: from 6,000 in 1934 to 14,000 in 1936 (i.e. just before the Metaxas dictatorship). It was under Zahariadis that the KKE’s Fourth Plenum (1934) dropped the slogan ‘autonomy of Macedonia’ (see footnote 3, below), something which undoubtedly contributed to its gaining 5.7 per cent of the vote in the 1936

the country's largest liberation movement (EAM)² and, through this movement, to come close to capturing power during the years 1943–4.

Having accepted during the years 1924–34 the Comintern's position calling for the unification of all three parts of Macedonia (Greek, Yugoslav, Bulgarian) into a single autonomous state within the context of a Balkan federation,³ the KKE had been actually acquiescing in a dismemberment of Greek territory, something which was bound to cause it serious political harm. Hence, if the KKE was to succeed in developing a resistance movement during the occupation – that is, by organizing its struggle in a nationalistic-patriotic fashion and by attempting to attract under its banner all Greeks willing to fight the Germans – it desperately needed, among other things, to shake off the 'un-patriotic' image of the period 1924–34. That is why Zahariadis' first letter (October 1940), in which he urged the Greek communists to fight against the invading Italians, proved extremely useful to the KKE: it provided the party with the 'patriotic' credentials it needed.

Interestingly enough, the position Zahariadis adopted in October 1940 openly conflicted with the new Comintern line of September 1939, and constituted one of the few 'nationalistic deviations' among the European communist parties of the time.

elections. For a study of the 1918–40 period see the sole scholarly history of the KKE – a very right wing one, though – by D. G. Kousoulas, *Revolution and Defeat. The Story of the Greek Communist Party* (London, 1965); an 'unorthodox' communist interpretation by D. Nefeloudis, *Stis Piges tis Kakodemontias, 1918–68* (Athens, 1974); an 'orthodox' brief history of the KKE by H. Ioannidis, 'To KKE, Psyhi tou Ellinikou Ergatikou Kinimatos', *Neos Kosmos*, No. 1 (January 1971). For KKE views on the party's relations with the Comintern see V. Tsikoulas, 'O Georgi Dimitrov ke to KKE sta Deka Prota Hronia tis Yparxis tou', *Neos Kosmos*, No. 6 (June 1972), and D. Sarlis, 'Ena Istoriko Documento Me Epikera Didagmata', *Neos Kosmos*, No. 11 (November 1971). For a collection of KKE documents see *Episima Kimena 1918–1940*, 4 vols. (Athens, 1974).

2. The *Ethniko Apeleftherotiko Metopo* (National Liberation Front) was formed in September 1941, being a coalition of communists and small socialist groups, with the KKE in control.

3. The KKE replaced its slogan 'autonomy for Macedonia' with 'equality of rights for all national minorities living in Greece', in its Third Plenum resolution, in April 1935. See 'I Triti Olomelia tis K. E. tou KKE', *Episima Kimena*, 1934–40, IV, p. 157. Hereafter cited as *KKE documents*, 1934–40.

But how did the KKE, a party which had repeatedly proved its loyalty to Moscow, adopt such a policy? And did this incident involve an attempt by the KKE to become more independent *vis-à-vis* the Comintern?

Until recently we have had no satisfactory explanation of why Zahariadis wrote his first 'nationalistic' letter, which was to be followed by two letters bringing the KKE gradually back into line with Comintern policies. The present article attempts to provide such an explanation, examining in turn: (a) the Metaxas dictatorship's struggle against the KKE (1936–40); (b) the Comintern directive of July 1939 to the KKE, and the new Comintern policy of September 1939; and (c) Zahariadis' three letters (October 1940, November 1940, January 1941). On the basis of evidence presented in this examination, I shall offer an interpretation of why Zahariadis wrote his three letters – and particularly the first one.

I *The KKE and the Metaxas dictatorship*

On 4 August 1936, a *coup d'état* took place as King George II signed two decrees, one suspending the articles of the constitution that guaranteed political liberties and the other dissolving parliament. With the king's blessing and support General Metaxas established his authoritarian regime and asserted that he had saved Greece from 'chaos and communism'. The riots of May 1936 in Salonika, the failure of the two largest political groupings (the Populists and the Liberals) to form a coalition government, and, finally, the general strike that was scheduled for 5 August form the core of the argument which the Metaxist regime used in its effort to substantiate its claims of 'chaos' and 'Communist threat'.⁴ It is hard to believe, though, that the Greek Communist Party (KKE), which had obtained only 5.76 per cent of the votes in the 1936 elections, was in a strong position to challenge the existing system, let alone overthrow it. It should be noted, also, that the army, after the unsuccessful 1935 Plastiras coup, had been purged of its republican officers and was therefore under solid royalist control. This explains not only the ease with which the

4. D. G. Kousoulas, *Revolution and Defeat*, pp. 118–25, attempts to justify the dictatorship along these lines, his relevant chapter having the characteristic title: 'The Alternatives: Dictatorship or Revolution'.

dictatorship was established but also its almost unchallenged survival until the German invasion in 1941.⁵ Finally, it should be mentioned that the political deadlock had been broken one day before the coup, when Sophoulis (the Liberal's leader), and Theotokis (the leader of a right-wing faction) visited the king and told him that they had agreed to form a coalition government. But the king did not seem interested in their proposal; thus the two politicians concluded that he had 'other plans', little knowing what these plans in fact were.

During the night of 4 August most leading KKE members escaped arrest. But the Metaxas authorities, whose agents had infiltrated the KKE's underground organization before the coup, very quickly achieved some spectacular results. Owing to such an agent, Zahariadis was arrested in September, and two months later Mytlas (a member of the Central Committee in whose house the KKE archives were found) suffered the same fate. Information included in these archives led to a large number of additional arrests.⁶ By April 1938, all members of the Politbureau had been arrested, with the exception of Siantos, who formed a new Politbureau by including in it the members of the Central Committee – Ploumbidis, Skafidas, Papayiannis. By November 1939, only Papayiannis remained at liberty, and he, without waiting for the approval of Zahariadis, temporarily took over the KKE leadership (while still recognizing Zahariadis as the official leader) by forming a Central Committee which was later to be labelled the 'Old Central Committee' (OCC). In fact, the leader of the OCC group was Ploumbidis who, even though interned in a sanatorium, kept in touch with the organization and directed it.⁷

Early in 1940, Maniadakis, the shrewd Minister of Public

5. The fact that the army was under right-wing control makes it imperative for those writers who attempt to justify the Metaxas dictatorship to talk about communist infiltration in the army. Such an effort is made by Haralambidis and Hadjiathanasiou in 'To Mystikon Arhion' (The Secret Archive), a series of articles in the daily newspaper *Ethnikos Kiryx*, 9 October 1949ff. The archives in question were those of Maniadakis, the Minister of Public Order during the Metaxas regime. But the only thing these articles succeed in demonstrating is precisely how negligible KKE infiltration in the army in fact was.

6. 'Mystikon Arhion', loc. cit., 9–10 October 1949.

7. KKE, *Episima Kimena 1940–5*, V, ed. KKE Esoterikou (1973), p. 24. Hereafter cited as *KKE Documents*, 1940–5.

Security who led the anti-KKE campaign, sensing that the arrests of all prominent KKE members had created a vacuum in the leadership of the party – a fact which explained the creation of the OCC – decided to bring into existence his ‘own’ Communist Party. Such an organization could only come into existence if Maniadakis had at his disposal high ranking KKE members willing to collaborate with the police. In June 1939, Tyrimos, a member of the Politbureau and editor in chief of *Rizospastis*, the KKE daily, signed a ‘repentance declaration’ disowning his ideology, and actively collaborated with the police in the creation of such a pseudo-communist organization.⁸ A few months later, Yannis Mihailidis, a member of the Politbureau, also signed a ‘repentance declaration’, and was freed from Corfu prison camp. Unlike Tyrimos, though, Mihailidis had signed such a declaration on the orders of Zahariadis, who had instructed him to investigate an accusation that there was a traitor among the KKE leaders and to reorganize the party on a new basis.⁹ But Mihailidis, quickly arrested, confessed all about his mission and decided to collaborate with the police.¹⁰ Maniadakis did not miss his chance; he used Mihailidis (who, unlike Tyrimos, was not suspected by the interned KKE leaders of collaborating with the

8. ‘Mystikon Arhion’, loc. cit., 11–13 October 1949. According to one of the authors of this study, Haralambidis, who was an officer in the Maniadakis’ police, Tyrimos told him that he had decided to struggle against the KKE only when he found out that his younger brother, who was studying in Moscow, had been executed as a Trotskyist.

9. Partsalidis interview. Dimitris (Mitsos) Partsalidis, whom I interviewed on 7 January 1975, is probably the most eminent KKE personality still alive. In various periods of the KKE history he has occupied the following posts: Member of the Central Committee of the KKE, member of the Politbureau, representative of the KKE in EAM, Secretary of the Central Committee of EAM, Prime Minister of the ‘Provisional Democratic Government’ formed by the KKE ‘somewhere in the mountains’ during the 1946–9 civil war. A moderate and broadminded communist, he clashed in 1950 with the then all-powerful Zahariadis. When Zahariadis, due to Soviet pressure, was toppled in 1956, Partsalidis was expected to take his place but the Soviets thought differently. Partsalidis later clashed with the new KKE leadership, and was one of the founders of the ‘liberal’ splinter Greek Communist Party, the ‘KKE Esoterikou’.

10. Mihailidis’ role is unclear. It has been asserted that despite his collaboration with Maniadakis he remained a communist at heart and tried to warn KKE members of the PA’s role. See *KKE Documents*, 1940–5, p. 34.

police) as the figurehead leader of a police-created Communist Party, which was to be labelled 'the Provisional Administration of the KKE' (PA).

So, at the beginning of 1940, the interned KKE leadership was thrown into total confusion as two communist parties came into existence, each publishing an underground *Rizospastis*, each professing loyalty to Zahariadis, each accusing the other of being a police-created organization. Many rank and file communists who had avoided arrest refused to cooperate with either of these two organizations, and tried to get in touch with the imprisoned KKE leaders. This situation made certain prison camps, and particularly the one of Akronafplia, in which 630 communists were held, very important centres from which information and advice were given to non-arrested KKE members who were seeking guidance. Zahariadis, who had been interned in Corfu prison camp with the most prominent KKE leaders, and the Akronafplia communists (to a lesser extent, though) expressed more trust in the police-created PA than in the OCC. Such an error was due to the fact that the PA was headed by Mihailidis, Zahariadis' trusted man, while the OCC had come into existence without Zahariadis' prior approval. The policies of the OCC were considered 'treacherous' as late as December 1942, but eventually its leaders were redeemed.¹¹ Conversely, the PA was condemned by Zahariadis in January 1941 – that is, not until a whole year after its founding.

We must say a further word about Maniadakis' 'repentance declarations'. Under extensive psychological and/or physical pressure, KKE members were induced to sign statements in which they disowned their ideology.¹² These 'repentance declarations' were then published in the censored press. Maniadakis, who had a deep respect for Zahariadis' leadership qualities and organizational abilities, believed that the KKE

11. 'The 2nd Panhellenic Conference of the KKE', December 1942, *KKE Documents 1940–5*, p. 113.

12. According to Kousoulas, *Revolution and Defeat*, p. 130, Maniadakis' 'repentance declaration' tactics, which aimed at 'breaking' an individual, were 'seemingly mild'. It is interesting to note that in one of the confidential Maniadakis' orders to the police, it is revealed that a communist when confronted with the dilemma of signing such a declaration chose to commit suicide by jumping from the window of the police station. See 'Mystikon Arhion', loc. cit., 28 December 1949.

would not disintegrate simply because most of its leaders were arrested. Maniadakis' aim was 'to deliver a blow against the organizational structure and monolithic structure of the KKE', and he used the declarations as his main weapon. 'Our party is monolithic in its ideas and does not permit such tactics as the signing of declarations because if we legitimize such declarations they can tear us apart': this was the reaction of the underground *Rizospastis* to Maniadakis' measures.¹³ The KKE suffered seriously from the publication of such declarations since: (a) it lost many members who by signing declarations were automatically considered as traitors by the KKE; (b) the party's morale was gradually shattered and this led to more declarations; (c) some communists who signed declarations, knowing that after such an action they were nothing more than traitors to the party, felt they were left with no other option but to become active police collaborators.

The creation of the PA, the tactic of repentance declarations, the fact that the KKE discovered in its ranks a large number of 'traitors' and spies – all these factors, even though they did not lead to the KKE's total disintegration, nevertheless succeeded in creating a phobia within the party, as KKE members saw 'spies' and 'traitors' everywhere. This phobia paralysed the KKE and forced it into a desperate, defensive position throughout the dictatorship.

II *The Comintern Directive of July 1939; the New Comintern Line of September 1939; the 'Old Central Committee's' stand*

In February 1939, the Fifth Plenum of the KKE under the chairmanship of G. Siantos declared: 'Our party struggles to secure the independence and integrity of the nation, but at the same time it states that the greatest enemy of our country's independence and integrity is . . . the monarchofascist dictatorship.' The Fifth Plenum went on to condemn the then signed Agreement between the Balkan Alliance and Bulgaria for 'opening the doors for Bulgaria's entrance into Western Thrace and Serbia's entrance into Salonika'.¹⁴ In July 1939 the

13. Quoted in 'Mystikon Arhion', 28 December 1949. See also 27 December.

14. 'The 5th Plenum of the Central Committee of the KKE', *KKE Documents* 1934–40, p. 463. The agreement in question was signed by General Metaxas in

Comintern's Political Secretariat sent a directive to the KKE which was in accordance with its policies of that period, urging all Communist Parties to support governments of their countries willing to preserve 'national independence' and oppose 'fascist aggression'.

Your country is threatened by the facist Axis and particularly by Italian fascism. . . . The first duty of the KKE is the defence of the country's independence. Since the Metaxas government also fight against the same danger there is no reason to pursue his overthrow as your first aim. Of course, you should struggle for more internal freedom for the Greek people because this strengthens the defensive capabilities of your country.

The directive went on to praise the Greek-Bulgarian agreement as 'a step towards the peaceful settlement of inter-Balkan differences', and urged the KKE to support the creation of a 'strong alliance of all Balkan countries'.¹⁵

In August 1939, the Soviet-German treaty was signed. At first, the French and British Communist parties, while praising the treaty, seemed eager to support the governments of their own countries against Axis aggression. The French Communist Party, for example, voted in support of war credits and general mobilization and stated that it would 'do nothing to hamper the unity so indispensable for the defence of the country'. A similar

his capacity as acting president of the Balkan Alliance (Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia and Romania) and the Bulgarian Foreign Secretary Giorgi Kiosseivanoff on 31 July 1938. It was agreed that Bulgaria should be allowed to rearm and fortify its borders and that the Balkan Alliance would not insist on the implementation of relevant clauses of the Neuilly and Lausanne treaties. Furthermore, the Agreement stated that all signatories should desist from using violence 'in their mutual relations, in conformity to the agreements each of these states had signed on the issue of non-aggression'. For the full text of the Agreement see *Efimeris tis Kyverniseos*, 12 November 1938, No. 429, pp. 2823-4.

15. Quoted in M. Kaila, 'To KKE ke i Kommounistiki Diethnis' (The KKE and the Comintern), *Neos Kosmos*, No. 11 (November 1973), p. 27. Siantos revealed the directive's existence in 1942 during his speech to the Panhellenic Conference.

stand was adopted by the British Communist Party.¹⁶ By the end of September, however, a new line started to emerge. *World News And Views*, in an article entitled 'Must the War Go On?', declared that an 'end' should be put 'to the imperialistic war'.¹⁷ According to the Comintern, as Dimitrov wrote, the division between 'aggressor and non-aggressor powers' now did not 'correspond to the real situation'. He went further to claim, 'what is more, it is the British and French imperialists who now come forward as the most zealous supporters of the continuation and further incitement of war'.¹⁸ By 1940, the communist campaign against the Allies became more explicit, and in April, *World News And Views* labelled the English and French as the 'warmongers'.¹⁹ The French Communist Party now admitted that it had made an error by voting in support of war credits, and when France had been invaded, it declared that its primary aim was to overthrow the 'government of 200 families which dragged our country into the present adventure'. After the armistice, it was to state that the defeat of French imperialism was a victory for the working class. The British Communist Party urged the overthrow of Churchill and asked: 'Is it not clear that Hitler and the ruling class of Germany would be unable to persuade their workers to carry on the war against a British Government which no longer held any menace for them?'²⁰ Finally the Yugoslav Communist Party accused certain party members of not understanding the character of the imperialistic war and blamed them for adopting the slogan 'if we are attacked, we should defend ourselves'.²¹

The Old Central Committee, contrary to the position Zahariadis adopted in his October 1940 letter, closely followed the September 1939 Comintern line. On 7 December 1940, it declared that 'the war which was caused by the Royalist-

16. *The Communist International 1919-1943 Documents*. Selected and edited by Degras, III, 1929-43 (London, 1965), pp. 439-40 (hereafter cited as *The Communist International 1929-43*).

17. *Ibid.*, p. 441.

18. Extracts from an Article by Dimitrov on the 'Tasks of the Working Class in the War' (November 1939), *ibid.*, pp. 450-1.

19. 'May Day Manifesto of the ECCI' (April 1940), *ibid.*, pp. 465-6.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 443 and pp. 463-4.

21. Quoted in B. Lazitsch, *Tito, et la révolution Yougoslave 1937-1956* (Paris, 1957), p. 42.

Metaxist gang and was ordered by the English imperialists cannot bear any relation whatsoever to the defence of our country. . . . Neither is it a war against fascism. . . .'²² On 18 March 1941, it made a similar statement.²³ Zahariadis' October 'patriotic' letter – which was, of course, immediately 'adopted' by the PA – was declared a 'forgery' by the OCC in December, and treated as one more of Maniadakis' tricks. In March 1941, in an article published in the OCC *Rizospastis*, Ploumbidis argued that Zahariadis' letter had been forged since Zahariadis would never address his letter to Maniadakis but only 'to the people', and, more importantly, since Zahariadis would have never signed his letter as 'Secretary of the Central Committee' (a title which belonged to V. Nefeloudis) but only as 'General Secretary, leader of the KKE'.²⁴ With these arguments as a basis, D. G. Kousoulas has asserted that Zahariadis deliberately made these 'errors' so that he could later disown the October letter if such an action suited his purposes.²⁵ Such a far-fetched thesis cannot stand because: (a) even though Zahariadis did, in fact, send his letter to Maniadakis for publication, he headed it: 'To the People of Greece' (*Pros to Lao tis Elladas*); (b) though Zahariadis signed his letter as 'Secretary of the Central Committee', he signed the same way in his second letter, in which he adopted a different stand. In his third letter as well, he did not use his 'General Secretary' title but signed simply as 'N. Zahariadis'. Finally, when interrogated by the Gestapo in Vienna (June 1941), he signed his defiant statement as 'Secretary of the Central Committee of the KKE and Member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International', and not as 'General Secretary'.²⁶ It seems clear, on the one hand, that Zahariadis was simply casual when using his title, and on the other, that the OCC, seeing Maniadakis' conspiracies

22. 'Manifesto of the Central Committee of KKE', *KKE Documents 1940–45*, p. 26.

23. See 'Decision of the Central Committee of the KKE', *ibid.*, p. 37.

24. In Th. Papakonstantinou, *Anatomia tis Epanastaseos* (Anatomy of the Revolution) (Athens, 1952), pp. 146–7. Also Kousoulas, *Revolution and Defeat*, p. 141.

25. Kousoulas, *op. cit.*, p. 141. Kousoulas, who has an excellent chapter on Maniadakis' anti-KKE tactics, has a very confusing and poor analysis of Zahariadis' position during the Greek-Italian war.

26. *KKE Documents 1940–45*, pp. 16, 23, 35 and 57.

everywhere, attached too much importance to certain trivial details. There is little doubt that had the OCC believed in the authenticity of Zahariadis' October letter it would have followed his line, rather than that of the Comintern.

III Zahariadis' 'first' (October 1940) letter

On 28 October 1940, Metaxas rejected the Italian ultimatum and the Italian invasion began. On 31 October, Zahariadis gave to Maniadakis his 'open' letter, which was promptly published in the censored press:

Today all Greeks are fighting for freedom, honour and national independence. . . . The people of Greece are conducting today a war of national liberation against Mussolini's fascism. . . . To this war, which is directed by the Metaxas government, all of us should dedicate all our efforts without any reservation. . . . The prize that will crown the working people's efforts should and will be a new Greece of work and freedom, a Greece saved from every imperialistic dependence, with a civilization truly of all the people.²⁷

Zahariadis' position was acclaimed by the Akronafplia group, headed by Ioannidis and Theos, in two letters they sent to the Metaxas government on 6 October and 13 November.²⁸

Zahariadis' October appeal to the 'people of Greece' was in direct contradiction to the Comintern line of that period. Both Zahariadis and the Akronafplia group were in fact supporting the unity of 'all' Greeks, at a time when the Comintern scorned those who 'wave the flag of national unity'. They were siding with Metaxas to fight for 'freedom, honour and independence' at a time when the Comintern warned that the 'proletariat . . . have nothing to defend in this war . . . , the war of their exploiters'.²⁹

In trying to explain Zahariadis' attitude it is of vital importance to examine whether the KKE leader, who had been

27. 'Open Letter to the People of Greece', *KKE Documents 1940-45*, p. 16.

28. *KKE Documents 1940-45*, pp. 17-18 and 19-21. It seems that the Akronafplia group had already adopted a 'patriotic' position prior to Zahariadis' letter (pp. 14-15).

29. *The Communist International 1929-1943*, op. cit., p. 454.

in prison since 1936, knew about (a) the July 1939 Comintern directive, or (b) the new September 1939 Comintern line. According to what Partsalidis told me (Partsalidis was in Corfu prison with Zahariadis), the KKE leader did not know of the directive's existence, since the Corfu prisoners found out about the directive only when Siantos (who had received the directive) was moved to Corfu and since, by that time, Zahariadis had been transferred to another prison in Athens. P. Nefeloudis, who was also in Corfu, confirms Partsalidis' view.³⁰ On the other hand, Zahariadis, according to Partsalidis again, not only knew about the September 1939 Comintern line, but had also accepted it as ideologically correct, and had defended it in his discussions with communist fellow prisoners who expressed different views. Partsalidis' information is again confirmed by what P. Nefeloudis writes.³¹ How was it then that Zahariadis, who had accepted in Corfu the correctness of the Comintern line, drastically changed his mind in Athens and wrote the October letter?

The only plausible explanation seems to be that, during his stay in Athens, Zahariadis came to know of the existence of the Comintern directive, *which in fact advised the KKE to do precisely what Zahariadis did in October 1940* – that is, support Metaxas against the Italian invaders. According to P. Nefeloudis, Maniatakis arranged a meeting between his PA agents and Zahariadis, during which they informed Zahariadis of the directive's existence. This was why, Nefeloudis asserts, Zahariadis was transferred from Corfu to Athens.³² It is interesting to note, however, that Maniatakis, when interviewed by D. G. Kousoulas, did not reveal the existence of such a plot, even though he had every reason to do so if it had existed. Maniatakis also told Kousoulas that Zahariadis had been moved from Corfu to Athens simply because Metaxas did not want the KKE leader to fall into Italian hands in case of a Greek-Italian war.³³ Nevertheless, whether or not Maniatakis orchestrated such a plot does not challenge the view that in Athens Zahariadis somehow discovered the directive's

30. Nefeloudis, *Stis Piges tis Kakodemonias*, 1918–68, p. 140.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 141–2.

33. Kousoulas, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

existence, since this is the only way that one can explain in a satisfactory manner Zahariadis' spectacular change of viewpoint after he had left Corfu. It is very possible that Zahariadis was briefed on the directive by Mihailidis, the PA figurehead leader, with whom Zahariadis, as Partsalidis told me,³⁴ had a meeting in his Athens prison. There is little doubt that such a meeting was organized by Maniatakis. Assuming that it was Mihailidis who told Zahariadis about the directive, it is impossible and in any case unimportant to determine whether Mihailidis gave such information on his own initiative or on Maniatakis' instructions.

In sum, the first and most important factor that influenced Zahariadis to write his October letter was the Comintern directive, the existence of which he discovered in Athens. It is important to remember, however, that the directive's July 1939 advice was outdated, since it had been replaced by the Comintern's new line of September 1939, a fact that Zahariadis could not have failed to know. Therefore, by deciding to follow the outdated directive's advice, rather than the current Comintern line, Zahariadis, in opposition to the OCC, was taking a bold initiative. Most communist parties, when the September 1939 Comintern stand was put forward, found themselves in the unhappy position of following a policy which was bound to cause them considerable political damage since it offended the 'patriotic-nationalistic' feelings which existed in their countries. It is not surprising, therefore, that many communist parties, despite their loyalty to the Comintern, looked for a secure way out of this unfortunate situation: for a sign that might indicate that this disastrous Comintern line had been changed, at least in relation to their particular cases. The Yugoslav Communist Party, for example, which had faithfully followed the September 1939 Comintern line, jumped at the first opportunity, i.e. the conclusion of a non-aggression pact between Yugoslavia and the USSR on the eve of the German invasion of Yugoslavia, to interpret such a pact as a change of the Comintern line in relation to Yugoslavia. This was why, as the German invasion took place, the YCP suddenly adopted a

34. All the above thoughts and conclusions – even though based to a great extent on Partsalidis' information – are my own, and are not necessarily shared by Partsalidis.

'patriotic' stand towards the German-Yugoslav war.³⁵ In this context one should view Zahariadis' decision to use the outdated Comintern directive as a convenient way out of implementing the September 1939 Comintern line. Zahariadis was facilitated in taking his October decision by the fact that the directive – contrary to the general advice to all communist parties contained in the September 1939 Comintern line – gave *specific advice to the KKE* to adjust its stand towards Metaxas in relation to Italian aggression.

A second factor that influenced Zahariadis' October decision, though clearly one of lesser importance, seems to have been his hope that the KKE might gain certain concessions from Metaxas in return for its October position. Even though Zahariadis' support was actually 'unconditional', he did propose to the Metaxas government certain measures the KKE would have liked to see implemented. Partsalidis, who gave me this information, did not specify what Zahariadis' proposals were. It is very possible that Zahariadis was hoping that Metaxas would at least free the approximately 2,000 interned communists. Such a hope was overtly expressed in the Akronafplia letters and hinted at in Zahariadis' October letter when he declared that 'all Greeks should fight the Italians'. How could the KKE members join the common struggle if they were kept in gaol? Zahariadis also seemed to hope that, under the pressure generated by the Italian invasion (a clear-cut victory for the Greek army was then unexpected), the Metaxas government might swing to what the KKE considered a neutralist policy, and appeal to the USSR for support. If such an appeal were made, there is no doubt that the KKE's position would be immediately strengthened. The existence of such a hope was hinted at when Zahariadis wrote in his October letter that the 'new Greece should and will' be 'saved from every imperialistic dependence'. Later, in January 1941, in his third letter, Zahariadis said that his aim, when writing the October 1940 letter, had been, among other things: '... (3) To restore popular liberties in Greece, a popular anti-plutocratic policy. (4) To make the war national, antifascist, anti-imperialistic. . . . This we could only achieve with a total orientation towards the Soviet Union. . . .'³⁶ It seems clear that,

35. Lazitsch, op. cit., p. 52.

36. 'The 3rd Open Letter of N. Zahariadis', *KKE Documents 1940–45*, p. 32.

when writing his October letter, Zahariadis was hoping that Metaxas would make certain alterations in his internal and foreign policy from which the KKE would benefit.

Finally, the fact that it was the Italians who had attacked Greece rather than the Germans – with whom the USSR had concluded the non-aggression pact – probably also played a minor part in facilitating Zahariadis' decision.

IV *Zahariadis' second (November 1940) and third (January 1941) letters*

In writing his first letter, Zahariadis had undoubtedly made, as Partsalidis termed it, a daring and risky decision (*tolmiri apofasi*). It seems that Zahariadis, who felt uncertain whether he had followed a correct policy in October, worried about the possible reactions of the Comintern to his 'daring' decision. Under these circumstances it is plausible to assume that Zahariadis became increasingly eager to obtain certain concrete concessions from Metaxas which would justify his October stand in the Comintern's eyes. Such concessions would include, as mentioned previously, the release of imprisoned KKE members, and more importantly, the pursuit of a pro-Soviet foreign policy by Metaxas. By November 1940 it became clear that Metaxas, who was indeed trying hard to follow a truly neutralist foreign policy and had been reluctant all along to admit British troops to Greece because he feared a German invasion,³⁷ had no intention of taking the measures Zahariadis hoped for. Owing to the fact that the Greek army had repelled the Italian invasion and had successfully counter-attacked the Italians in Albania, Metaxas felt no need to make concessions in any direction. Therefore, Zahariadis, by using the excuse that the war was taking place in Albanian territory, decided to alter his October stand. The new position he adopted, in his second letter of 26 November 1940, was something between those of his first letter (and the July directive) and the Comintern line of September 1939. The Italians were still considered the main enemy, but the war between England and Italy-Germany was for the first time

37. In January 1941 Metaxas declined A. Wavell's offer of men and material. For details see: 'Gen. Sir Archibald P. Wavell, Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East', from 7 February 1941 to 15 July 1941, Supplement to the *London Gazette*, No. 37638, 3 July 1946, pp. 3, 423–44.

branded as 'imperialistic': 'Greece has no place in the imperialistic war between England and Italy-Germany. Since our people are effectively defending their independence and their national liberty, today they only want one thing, freedom and neutrality.' He finally warned Metaxas that the KKE would not support the continuation of an imperialistic war.³⁸ Zahariadis smuggled his letter out of gaol and sent it to the PA, which at that time he still trusted. He instructed the PA to publish it in the underground *Rizospastis* and to make sure that all communists were informed of its existence.

The precarious balance that Zahariadis' second letter tried to achieve, between the advice of the directive and the September 1939 Comintern line, was quickly shattered. As the PA did not publish Zahariadis' second letter, the KKE leader – who somehow was kept well informed – finally concluded that the PA had been a Maniatakis tool all along. There is little doubt that this discovery was the main factor influencing Zahariadis' decision to write his third letter of 15 January 1941, addressed to the Communist Youth Organization, in which he fully adopted the September 1939 Comintern line. According to the third letter, the war Greece was fighting was an imperialistic war, and the KKE's main enemy was Metaxas, not the Italians. Zahariadis was undoubtedly alarmed by the fact that the police-created PA had been using his October letter to urge the communists to support Metaxas. This meant that he was in danger of being accused by the Comintern of adopting, with his first letter, a line that suited the interests of pseudo-communists and police agents. Zahariadis' perception of such a danger is clearly expressed in his third letter, in which he adopted a defensive position towards his first letter, as he found it necessary to state that for his October letter he took 'full responsibility *vis-à-vis* the KKE and the Communist International'. He also found it necessary to imply that his first letter had not in fact been 'social-patriotic'. He did this by attacking the PA for transforming his first letter 'into a clearly social-patriotic document', and, hence, for trying 'to stain the honour of the KKE'. Finally, for the first time, he also found it necessary to leave no doubt about his loyalty to the Comintern by using at the beginning and end of his letter the slogan 'Hail the Communist International'.³⁹

38. 'Open Letter', *KKE Documents 1940–45*, pp. 22–3.

39. 'The 3rd Open Letter of N. Zahariadis', *ibid.*, pp. 31–5.

Zahariadis' three letters can now be schematically presented:

Comintern Dir., July 1939

ZAHARIADIS' 1st LETTER

31 October 1940

(a) Main enemy: Italians

(b) War: National-Liberation

ZAHARIADIS' 2nd LETTER

26 November 1940

(a) Main enemy: Italians

(b) War: Imperialistic

Comintern Line, Sept. 1939

ZAHARIADIS' 3rd LETTER

15 January 1941

(a) Main enemy: Metaxas

(b) War: Imperialistic

It is interesting to note that the position Zahariadis finally adopted with his third letter is identical to the one the OCC had been putting forward throughout the war, the only difference being that, owing to his first and second letters, Zahariadis argued that the war Greece was fighting had not been imperialistic from the start, but had eventually assumed such a character.

3RD ZAHARIADIS LETTER

JAN. 1941

After chasing the Italians *out* of Greece the blood of our soldiers is spilled in vain, and today *English imperialism* collects, in the blood of the Greek children, the interest of the capital it invested in . . . the Monarchofascist dictatorship.

. . . the people and the army should *overthrow* the Monarchofascist dictatorship of Metaxas, who is their principal and main enemy.

This (i.e. neutrality and peace) we could only achieve with a *total orientation* towards the Soviet Union.⁴⁰

OLD CENTRAL COMMITTEE

STAND, DEC. 1940

We are appealing to our warriors to refuse to fight *outside* the borders of our country. What are we doing in Albania? The war was ordered by the belligerent *English plutocrats*.

. . . we should *first of all overthrow* the gang of the King and Metaxas which got us involved in the war.

. . . and *ensure our neutrality towards the continuation of the imperialistic war, by orientating our policy towards the Soviet Union.*(*)⁴¹

40. Quotes from Zahariadis' 3rd letter: pp. 32, 35. Italics my own.

41. Quotes from OCC declaration, pp. 25, 28. Italics my own except where indicated (*). All quotes from *KKE Documents 1940-45*.

Conclusion

The October 1940 letter, which formulated the KKE's first reaction to the Greek-Italian war, and the second and third letters, which followed, were the products not of a party decision but of a purely personal one made by the imprisoned KKE leader Nikos Zahariadis while he was isolated from other Politbureau members. A communist of some international standing (head of the Comintern's Balkan Bureau), Zahariadis exerted total control over the party machine. His prestige within the KKE had immensely grown after he had succeeded, during the period 1931–6, in rebuilding a divided party. His defiant attitude during the Metaxist dictatorship had further strengthened his position in the KKE leadership, and his charismatic personality had assured him of the personal devotion of party members.

As the possibility of war with Italy grew, inter-party discussions were held both inside prisons and outside them in an effort to formulate the KKE's attitudes in case such a war took place. Although conflicting views were voiced by party members, no separate factions were formed; hence one cannot speak of an inter-KKE conflict between 'nationalist' and 'internationalist' groups. Zahariadis' ultimate decision would have been unquestionably endorsed – indeed, would have been more than welcomed – by the confused members of a shattered party. The surviving small party groups were scattered all over Greece, lying low. Their leaders, all being minor KKE officials (since the major KKE leaders had been arrested), had insufficient prestige to make any sort of decision on such an important question. This situation made the KKE depend entirely on an initiative from Zahariadis in case a Greek-Italian war broke out. When the invasion did take place, Zahariadis, with his October letter, gave the party exactly what it desperately needed: a clear political line to follow. After the 1956 inter-KKE anti-Zahariadis campaign, efforts were made to stress 'independent' actions by party groups or leaders in connexion with the KKE's October 1940 policies. The message the new 1956 KKE leadership wanted to put forward was that the KKE would have adopted a 'patriotic' stand irrespective of Zahariadis' attitude. This is sheer nonsense. Had 'the leader' taken a *different*

stand in 1940 the party would have unquestionably followed suit. Hence, if one aims at explaining and analysing the KKE's October 1940 policy there is little else to do but concentrate primarily on Zahariadis' attitude. Of course, as already noted, the Akronafplia detainees had adopted a 'patriotic' position prior to Zahariadis' first letter (it is as yet unclear what reasons led them to such a decision). This happened obviously because at the time there was no 'Zahariadis line'. Had the KKE leader on 31 October opted for an 'internationalist' stand, the Akronafplia detainees (headed by Politbureau member Ioannidis, whose devotion to Zahariadis was unquestionable) would have undoubtedly followed his lead – as long, of course, as they accepted the authenticity of his message. (The fact that the OCC party members stuck to their own 'internationalist' position in spite of Zahariadis' first letter should be attributed solely to the fact that they believed the KKE leader's open letter to have been forged by the Metaxist authorities.)

Unquestionably, with his first letter, Zahariadis was making a very courageous decision since he was refusing to implement the September 1939 Comintern stand. The Comintern slogans were too general, in the sense that they appealed to the communist parties of so many different countries; too rigid, in the sense that they offered no options; and, most importantly, too closely connected to the Soviet Union's own interests to be of any value to the individual communist parties that were facing specific and complex situations in their own countries. Zahariadis' October policies were of course not based on such criticisms of the Comintern. The KKE leader's decision to write his first letter simply took into account the fact that the KKE could not afford, after the disastrous Macedonian policies it had pursued in the past, to follow another 'unpatriotic' line.

Yet, despite such a correct assumption, and despite the courage of his decision, Zahariadis eventually adopted the Comintern policies. Such a development is not so surprising as it appears at first glance. The main reason for Zahariadis' failure to remain firm regarding his October position is that, despite his 'independent' first letter, the KKE leader *remained a Comintern devotee*. His devotion to the Comintern is openly articulated in a small book he wrote in prison and completed in June 1939, in which he leaves no doubt that the KKE was for him nothing else

but 'the Greek part of the Comintern'.⁴² It is extremely important to notice, first, that Zahariadis' *October stand was totally dependent on the existence of another piece of Comintern advice, i.e., the 1939 directive*. This becomes obviously clear if one bears in mind that, before finding out about the directive's existence, Zahariadis had accepted, and was ready to implement, the Comintern line of September 1939. Hence, before adopting his October position and deciding not to follow the September 1939 Comintern line, Zahariadis needed an 'alibi', a way out, which could be provided only by the Comintern itself, or, of course, by the USSR. Second, had Zahariadis based his October position primarily on his own independent conclusions, rather than on the existence of the directive, he would not have worried so much about the Comintern's reactions to his first letter. But, since this did not happen, Zahariadis became increasingly alarmed lest he had gone too far by following outdated Comintern advice rather than the current Comintern line. Therefore, since Zahariadis' upholding of his October stand was dependent on Comintern approval, it necessarily became frail. As certain events convinced Zahariadis that he was in danger of being castigated by the Comintern for his October initiative, he fully adopted the September 1939 Comintern line in his third letter, after toying for a while with the middle-of-the-road solution which he had adopted in his second letter.⁴³

Had Zahariadis' second, and particularly his third letter, in which he had urged Greek soldiers to disobey orders and had branded the war the Greeks fought as 'imperialistic', been published in the Greek press, the KKE would have suffered immense political damage from which it would have recovered only with great difficulty during the occupation. But when both these letters fell into the hands of the Metaxist authorities, Maniadakis, considering them 'subversive' in a wartime period, opted for their non-publication. This meant that the vast majority of the Greek population, which knew all about the first

42. Nikos Zahariadis, *Epilogi Kimenon* (Selection of texts) (Athens, n.d.), p. 38.

43. The 'certain events' were, for example: Metaxas' failure to pursue a 'neutralist foreign policy' in the manner the Soviets viewed such a policy, Metaxas' refusal to release KKE detainees thus indicating a softening of his anti-communist attitude, and, finally, Zahariadis' discovery that the PA, which was enthusiastically backing his first letter, was a tool of the police.

letter, discovered the existence of the second and third letters only after the liberation – a fact which enabled the KKE to boast of its ‘nationalism-patriotism’ throughout the occupation on the basis of Zahariadis’ first letter. It is therefore hardly surprising that even P. Nefeloudis has been forced to admit, despite his strong dislike for Zahariadis, that the latter’s first letter was extremely important, as it enabled the KKE to gain considerable prestige in the eyes of the Greek people, and laid ‘the most solid foundations’ for the formation of the resistance movement during the period 1942–4.⁴⁴ M. Partsalidis, in an anti-Zahariadis speech in 1950, together with accusations he launched, also praised Zahariadis’ October letter for being the ‘basis’ on which EAM (i.e. the resistance period’s National Liberation Front) was built.⁴⁵

It is interesting to note that the KKE, both during Zahariadis’ leadership (until 1955) and after his replacement, adopted two distinctly different attitudes towards Zahariadis’ three letters. While the first letter was given the widest possible publicity, the second and third letters were treated as if they had never existed.⁴⁶

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44. P. Nefeloudis, op. cit., p. 139.

45. ‘Partsalidis’ speech towards the 7th Plenum (1950) of the Central Committee of the KKE, *Neos Kosmos* (August 1950), No. 8, p. 494.

46. For such examples consult: *Rizospastis*, 28 October 1945, p. 1; ‘Materials of the 7th Plenum of the KKE (1957)’, *Neos Kosmos*, March 1957, pp. 89, 98, 99; and P. Mavromatis, ‘O Defteros Pangosmios Polemos ke i Synepies tou gia tin Ellada’, *Neos Kosmos*, No. 12 (December 1969). An interesting discussion on the KKE’s recent attitude towards Zahariadis’ letters is found in S. Karras, ‘Politiki Provlmatismi’, *Apo tin Istoria ke tin Synhroni Pragmatikotita tou Ellinikou Kommounistikou Kinimatos* (Athens, 1957), pp. 86–7.